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DOES YOUR CHURCH BELIEVE IN GOD?

A SERMON
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“Does Your Church Believe in God?”

Being the first of a series of four sermons which seek to set forth again the faith that is in us and to answer specifically, as we should, these questions often put by inquiring minds which are seeking truth and spirit, even as we are:

“Does Your Church Believe in God?”

“Does Your Church Believe in the Bible?”

“Does Your Church Believe in the Divinity of Christ?”

“Does Your Church Believe in Conversion?”

Does Your Church Believe in God?

GROUPS calling themselves liberal are saying quite widely that God, all institutions and all language pertaining to Him, are man-imposed upon those who lack the strength of mind to resist. The matter is very simple, strike at the fountain head of the whole delusion; get rid of all who talk about religion and all her works and the deception will disappear. "These use your name, liberal. Are you one with them?"

Did building the water-works get our city into the water-using habit? If we could get rid of the promoters and destroy the water-works, would this water-using habit disappear? It is safe to say that the promoters did not make the thirst or the stream. Thirst is so because we are made so. This imperative human need built the water-works. The promoters had nothing to do with making the need or the supply. They simply took up a part of the stream into a basin; purified it; took out; added to and got it to the people. Getting rid of the promoters of water-works would not effect in the least the water-using habit.

Is there something in people just because they are people, and not stones and brutes, that is comparable to this persistent thirst? Did it, just because it would not be denied and must have satisfaction, build all religious institutions? Would getting rid of all the works that pertain to the distribution of this "living water" have just the same bearing on getting rid of the thirst itself, as getting rid of the

water-works would have in breaking up the water habit? In both cases would the same human need that built them once, build them again?

This something in people, because they are people, that reaches out for something it calls God and frames beliefs about Him, is very wide spread. It seems not to depend on place, time, local accident or condition. Whenever we can call beings, people, it is present. According to the measure of the understanding, all have reached out for God and said how they regarded Him. The whole matter of God and religion seems to generate inside before it manifests itself without, rather than something made first outside, then forced in. Helen Keller was a good subject for this experiment. The normal entrances for outside deceptions were effectively closed. The story is that she was guarded purposely from outside religion getting in, because they wished to see if this feeling about God is an extraneous matter brought in through eye and ear to darken an otherwise naturally free and godless mind. When communication was established and the religion outside, and that which her own spirit within had generated, when these met and spoke together and she was told of God, the Father, she said that she had always known Him but she did not know His name.

Is it this way? From time immemorial, through all the human record and before, the human mind, as long as it has been a human mind, has been reaching out, framing its beliefs, constructing the outward evidences of what was going on within. Fear, dread, wonder, the sense of helplessness and loneliness in

such a big, unmanageable world, the presence of death which finally got the advantage, all these drove men to seek relationships and allies. They clothed that which they sought with attributes, usually their own, and gave it a name. These beliefs, all the attributes and names, varied as they are, from all the human groups that have lived on the earth, have come down to us, a great stream of them. The human spirit is the living spring whence the stream issued forth at first. We did not make the human spirit or the stream of belief that it has made or the present desire of people to dip into it. Each religious institution is just the water-works at the side of the stream flowing from the eternal hills. Each group takes into its own basin, adds to or takes away and gives out to its own what it believes to be the pure water of life. With the stream flowing by so many human habitations, we know now that it contains some things which do not make for life. The stream of belief has come through so many minds, ignorant, superstitious, even designing, that it does need to be taken up and dealt with. We are a group saying what we think should be taken out and added.

As a church we have tried to say that from the first man who set up a stick and called it God, to the last professor who has written a book about Him, all have sought satisfaction for the same craving of the human spirit. From the first man who beat his fetich with a stick to make it do his bidding, to the last man acquiescing in, "Thy will, not mine, be done," for both and all between, it has been the same need calling to the same supply. The water has

always been the same and the thirst has always been the same. Before man had a name for either; before men knew the structure of the watery frame of man, which now makes the thirst understood, or the composition of the water; from the first man who drank from a stream to the last man who turns it from a faucet and calls it H_2O , it has always been the same thirst and the same water. The great life of the world, named with the hundred names, has always been the same. It was the same call to Him back in Babylon, Egypt and India. Though each thought he was speaking to his own he was speaking to the same One of all. All the religions, all the Bibles, all the ways of worship, with smoking flesh, wine, flowers or contrite hearts, wailing or dancing before Him, all came out of the same spirit of man directed to the same One of all. Destroy all and that call of the human spirit which built once, will build again, as the springs will fill the river bed again after we have drained it dry.

We, as a church, get our name from this: He who is named with all the names; to whom all hands stretch; before whom all hearts are uncovered; He is One, the only One.

“One Lord there is, all lords above;

His name is Truth, his name is Love.”

We hold up to the seeking mind and the searching heart a being, from many made one, who is the origin, life and destiny of the universe and all that it contains. Through eight, ten thousand years of the human record we trace the process of seeking if haply they might find Him. We note the gods of

each conquered people made into a pantheon in Egypt, Assyria and Babylon; another pantheon in Jerusalem of which Jehovah became chief, then the exclusive god, bettering as time went on, increasing the bounds of His habitation until He became a universal God. The Jews said he is One. Jesus humanized Him; said He is One but a better One than those before had ventured to believe. This One of the Jews, brought within the moral law and made more congenial to the human heart by the thought of Jesus, displaced the pantheons of Greece and Rome and became the God of western civilization. As our church name indicates, we have tried to preserve this unity of his being; tried to hasten the process of thought so that all men everywhere may feel that He is one and all one with Him; tried to prevent the reversion to a multiplicity or a trinity of beings.

As a church we have been most insistent on this, that this is His world and He should be thought of as in it in immediate and sympathetic relationship with all. The companionable way that Jesus had of speaking to Him as one of His good friends, has appealed to us. When Jesus says, "See how friendly I am with you and with Him, and He is just as friendly as I am; will be your good friend, too," we take this for reality. This far away potentate, sitting sternly above his world, uncommunicative and terrible in his own counsel,

"Nor dares the favorite angel pry
Between the folded leaves,"

in which the fates of men are recorded, this being,

who only nods life and death, we have tried to bring down. These mortal, neglected worms, trembling before his awful will, we have tried to bring up, so that haughty ruler there and trembling subject here may be father and son both there and here.

So we have tried to say that it is His world about us; it is His form; He made it and is in it still; throned afar, yet flaming in the sun, in the rain, in summer's golden bounty and the winter's storm, in the quickening air, at even hour and the march of night; Shekinah of the snow-flake and glory of the star, here is His handiwork and present habitation.

“Creation lives and moves in thee,
Thy present life through all doth flow.”

As we have seen Him in the lesser of His works so we see Him in the greater. God made man.

“But higher far, and far more clear,
Thee in man's spirit we behold,
Thine image and thyself are there.”

The touch that made the lily made the man. We have tried to bridge the gulf between the terrible aloofness and separateness of God and the littleness and worthlessness of man; tried to say that man is His temple. He can be seen to best advantage in His best work and in the dear human relationships.

“He hides himself within the loves
Of those whom we love best.”

The smiles and tones of our homes are His shrines and everywhere is His Holy Place,

“If love unseal the eyes.”

This gives us our symbol. To what is He most nearly, though faintly, comparable? We have noted all that has been said. He is like a stick, a carved image, a tree, the sun, an animal, a mighty warrior, a judge, a bad, vindictive man. He is most like the best man. "As a father pitieth his children." We have the Fatherhood of God, the final symbol of what He is most like. Strange that this inevitable logic was not seen before, the best made reveals the maker best.

It follows that God still lives. All that men of any country or time have ever felt is still about us to feel. Every land opens Godward just as Palestine.

"The listening soul makes Sinai still
Wherever we may be."

And all of God there was, still is, and everyone is in the direct line of communication. In this God-made man are the God-made means, human too, of dealing directly with Him. Just the natural human powers can do it without prophet ecstasies or rending of the veil of clay, without angel visitant or opening skies. All is open to each, limited only by his dimness of soul and capacity to take. This present fulness of God, available all of it for each, we substitute for a reservoir of deity once delivered to the saints for occasional dispensation through guardians in the right succession. Though friendly to their good intent, we, as a church, look upon all who try to put us into communication with God, very much as we look at those who try to sell us sunshine. Our lines

are open to the same sun and our title as well established. Those who come between can reflect only or cast a shadow.

As a church we have taken the soul of man as the place of first and last revelation. All that one can ever know of God is that experienced in his own soul. That which other men have felt has written all that has been said about Him and what men have written men must judge; say each by his own soul, yea or nay. All that has been said is at best hearsay evidence, depending upon the credibility of the witness. Having fixed the seat of authority in the bettering heart of man, we are not alarmed that in losing Jerusalem or Rome or any human record we shall lose Him and be left alone.

“The life of God within the soul,
Lives and outlasts them all.”

“In every heart it findeth place,
And waiteth to be known.”

We have tried to make the world say, “God is good.” We have said it and preached it and sung it until it is even popularly known that we believe that God will not damn any human soul. As a nation we inherited Calvin’s God and it was this thought of Him that went across the country as it was settled up. Theodore Parker said that this thought of God was just his idea of incarnate evil, the devil. We have tried to say that this God needed to be civilized, humanized and Himself brought within the moral law. He must be first a moral being of our kind of morality.

“But nothing can be good in him
Which evil is in me.”

With us the thought of God is first. All that we believe and all that we reject follow inevitably from this. He has power; He can. He is love. He wills generously and is able to perform. Our belief in the final order of the world and the rule of right, in which truth will prevail and the good be crowned, follows from our thought of God. All that we do not believe follows inevitably. All fear for lost souls in burning hells; all distress of mind about our relations to Him, all this disappears before our thought of God, just as the darkness goes when the light streams in and fills the place.

Walt Whitman complained that the sermon said nothing about the evil and the dark. We do have sickness, crime, pain and death. Nature is cruel and there is suffering among all the creatures He has made. We cannot forget this if we would. Some would cut the knot by dividing the Kingdom, having one being for nature and the dark and another for the heart of man. We have chosen to call it all God's world rather than to divide the Kingdom. Some of the evil, “We dare not throne above.” All that is ours we can bind and cast out. Sickness we can cure in time. No evidence has come that death is evil. All that is left that seems dark; all that we did not make and cannot banish—we give Him the benefit of the doubt until we know as we are known. Between having some shadows in the picture and impugning the moral character of God, we choose the first.

The answer to the question, "Do we believe in God?" is that we do not believe in anything else. Unitarianism is the belief at the opposite pole from doubt and denial. It is the standing protest against atheism which shuts Him out of the world completely. It is a protest against that partial atheism which finds Him in one people only, one time, one book, one soul and denies His presence in all but them. It opposes to this a world God-made, God-filled, God-run and God-destined.